

1.3.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury  
Ash Wednesday. Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

Today's Gospel reading is quite clear about how we should pray, and how we should behave when fasting. There is to be no show, no fanfares at street corners, no making one's face unsightly. Rather, when fasting one is to wash (not a ritual sprinkling but a serious wash) and anoint one's head so that the people do not know one is fasting but only our Father in heaven.

And so tonight, we are about to disfigure our heads by smearing ash on our foreheads whilst we fast (whatever fasting means in a culture of hyper consumerism).

Behind Matthew's strictures lies another story. This is a story, the characters never existed but it is a story about great courage and faithfulness. Set in the time of the exile in Babylon, this is the story of Judith, a Jew, and Holofernes, a Gentile king. Holofernes is threatening to exterminate the Jews. Judith, with faith in God, and with great courage says she will deal with Holofernes. She goes to see him. She gets herself ready. She puts on the best make-up she can. She does her hair. She wears the most beautiful dress. She is dressed....to kill. She goes to Holofernes, seduces him, and, as he is drunk, draws his own sword and slays him. Truly she has saved her people.

Matthew uses the make-up and the dress as being crucial. You do not fast miserably in the Kingdom of Heaven. You fast joyfully, knowing you are doing something for God. I have here a bottle of nail-varnish. If anyone, male or female, wishes to do their nails today, then be my guest. There is also a bottle of scent, again, if you wish to try it, be my guest.

We have to remember that Ash Wednesday is a day of joy. It is about our faithful struggle with sin and death. We remember that God-in-Christ desires us to live faithfully and courageously. We have God behind us, willing us on into battle. And in the name of that God we will overcome sin and find new life.

The Cross we wear today is the sign of that joy. It is Christ who reaches out to us and offers us new life. I love the figure of the resurrected Christ that hangs behind the altar. Having entered into his sacrifice on the Cross, the resurrected Christ welcomes us with open arms and with the glory of the Kingdom surrounding him.

This is the day of the Lord. When we know we meet God in the silence of our hearts and find new life. May this Ash Wednesday be a time of great joy and great hope and bring us to new life. Amen.

## Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—  
a day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them  
    in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
    return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
    rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
    for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
    and relents from punishing.  
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
    and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain-offering and a drink-offering  
    for the Lord, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
    gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
    assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
    even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
    and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar  
    let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep.  
Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord,  
    and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
    a byword among the nations.

Why should it be said among the peoples,  
“Where is their God?” ’

## **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

### **Concerning Almsgiving**

‘Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Concerning Prayer**

‘And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Concerning Fasting**

‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

### **Concerning Treasures**

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.